The heirs of Bishop Wilfrid

*The Heirs of Bishop Wilfrid: Succession and Presumption in Early Anglo-Saxon England**

Wilfrid, bishop of Hexham, one-time bishop of Northumbria and the head of a monastic federation which stretched as far as Sussex, has always been a divisive figure. For his contemporaries in seventh- and eighth-century England, it was the sheer size of his ecclesiastical dominion which attracted suspicion, hostility and, doubtless, envy. It extended far beyond the borders of any single Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and Wilfrid's life was spent in a more or less continual state of struggle against a series of royal and archiepiscopal attempts to break it up. For a generation, Wilfrid inspired both firm resistance from those who opposed such an audacious spread of personal power, and an equally fierce loyalty from those who followed him into exile when he journeyed to Rome seeking papal intervention against his rivals.

He has continued to divide historians, too, but chiefly over matters such as his personal character and the manner in which he exercised his episcopal authority. When we are so used to probing the highly conventionalised descriptions of early medieval saints for cracks or imperfections, looking hard for any evidence of a reality behind the many tropes and *topoi*, it comes as some surprise to open the hagiography of St Wilfrid and find a saint's Life so proud of its subject's worldly magnificence. The author of that Life, a priest named Stephen, made no attempt to play down 'all the earthly glories and riches of St Wilfrid the bishop, as well as the number of his monasteries, the magnitude of his buildings, and the countless army of companions adorned with royal vestments and arms'.[1] While some

* I am grateful to Zubin Mistry, Conor O'Brien and the *EHR* reviewers for their generous comments on earlier drafts of this article.

1 Stephen, *Vita S. Wilfridi* [hereafter Stephen, *VW*], ch. 24, ed. B. Colgrave, *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 48.

historians insist that all this reveals nothing more than the 'instincts ... of a cosmopolitan churchman', others conclude instead 'that Wilfrid decided to adopt the indigenous model of a secular king' and lived out his stormy career in a manner which 'retains much of the flavour of the Germanic warlord'.[2]

It has therefore seemed entirely appropriate that the fate of Wilfrid's monastic empire should have been decided, we are told, in a treasury. What portable wealth the bishop still possessed after his years of exile and dislocation was housed at Ripon, the Northumbrian monastery once given to him by King Alhfrith and which he had since enriched with a deep crypt and grandiose architecture.[3] Here, says Stephen the priest, Wilfrid summoned eight chosen men and ordered 'all the silver and gold, along with the precious stones, to be laid down before them'. When the treasures were brought out, they were divided at his command into four parts. One quarter of the treasury was intended for Rome, as a gift for the churches of the saints. Of the remaining three portions, one was to be given to the poor, for the sake of his soul; another to his houses at Ripon and Hexham, so that they might 'purchase the friendship of kings and bishops'; and the last divided between those of his followers whose loyalty had not previously been rewarded with lands or estates. Wilfrid concluded by naming his kinsman, a priest named Tatberht, as his abbatial heir, 'so that while I still live he may have control of Ripon along with me, and then possess it without any scruple after my death'.[4] These arrangements made, Wilfrid headed south, on a journey that proved to be his last. Illness struck him while he visited the abbots of his Mercian houses. He died at the

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2 H. Mayr-Harting, *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England* (3rd edn., London, 1991), p. 157; D. Pelteret, 'Saint Wilfrid: Tribal Bishop, Civic Bishop or Germanic Lord?', in J. Hill and M. Swan, eds., *The Community, the Family and the Saint: Patterns of Power in Early Medieval Europe* (Turnhout, 1998), pp. 159–80, at 175; P. Wormald, 'The Age of Bede and Aethelbald', in J. Campbell, ed., *The Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1982), pp. 70–100, at 83.

3 Stephen, *VW*, chs. 8 and 17, ed. Colgrave, pp. 16–18, 34–6.

4 Ibid., ch. 63, pp. 136–8.

monastery of Oundle in the spring of 710 and was brought back to Ripon, where he was buried beside the altar and revered as a saint.[5]

Stephen's account of the disposal of ecclesiastical office, property and treasure has always been central to historians' views of Wilfrid, and prized as a rare window onto aspects of the early Anglo-Saxon Church which more idealistic writers, such as the Venerable Bede, would have glossed over. 'Unlike the latter', writes Walter Goffart, 'Stephen condescended to realism' by acknowledging that monastic communities would need a ready supply of 'gifts' (*munera*) with which to buy the support of both kings and bishops.[6] Such proprietary arrangements for his followers, as well as the designation of a blood relative as his heir, evoke for Alan Thacker 'the actions of a Germanic lord in the midst of his *comitatus* (following), rather than the traditional death-bed scenes of a Christian bishop and abbot'.[7] They certainly do not conform to Benedictine ideals of abbatial election, even though Stephen elsewhere portrayed Wilfrid as a committed champion of the Benedictine Rule; and their concern with the sober details of property and succession seems to be a world away from the conventional *topoi* of most saints' Lives.[8] We have become accustomed to pay attention when hagiographers break from their idealistic scripts in this way—to look, as Paul Fouracre instructs us, for moments 'in which a measure of historical reality restrained the use

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5 The evidence for the date of Wilfrid's death is equivocal and subject to debate. It is reviewed by Clare Stancliffe, who demonstrates that the correct date can only be 24 April 710: 'Dating Wilfrid's Death and Stephen's *Life*', in N.J. Higham, ed., *Wilfrid: Abbot, Bishop, Saint. Papers from the 1300th Anniversary Conferences* (Donnington, 2013), pp. 17–26, at 17–18.

6 W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A.D. 550–800): Jordanes, Gregory of Tours, Bede, and Paul the Deacon* (Princeton, NJ, 1988), p. 281.

7 A. Thacker, 'Wilfrid [St Wilfrid] (*c.*634–709/10)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (60 vols., Oxford, 2004), lviii. 944–50, at p. 948.

8 Cf. *Regula S. Benedicti*, ch. 64, ed. A. de Vogüé and J. Neufville, *La Règle de Saint Benoît*, Sources Chrétiennes: Série de textes monastiques d'Occident, clxxxi–clxxxvi (7 vols., 1971–2), ii. 648–54; Stephen, *VW*, ch. 47, ed. Colgrave, p. 98.

the authors could make of convention'.[9] Stephen's account of Wilfrid's preparations in his treasury at Ripon seems to exemplify the point and, as a result, it has hardly been doubted that the scene does indeed allow us a clear glimpse of the 'historical reality' of Wilfrid's aims, outlook and disposition.

And yet, as a forceful essay by D.P. Kirby in this journal has emphasised, the famous scene has a sequel that immediately complicates matters.[10] Stephen's *Vita S. Wilfridi* continues with an account of a second address, made by Wilfrid to the rest of the Ripon community after he and his chosen men had left the treasury. The content of that second speech differs fundamentally from the first, even though its subject is again the future of the monastery of Ripon. In the treasury, Wilfrid was said to have named his kinsman Tatberht as head (*praepositus*) of the monastery in preparation for assuming the abbacy after Wilfrid's death. Now, to the community at large, Wilfrid announced only that the current *praepositus*, a man named Caelin, would be leaving to resume his former life as a hermit—but said of himself that he was leaving for Mercia, planning to visit King Ceolred and to return with a new leader, 'the man whom I found worthy of putting in charge of you'.[11] For Kirby, the disjuncture between the two speeches was a key sign that the historical value of the *Vita Wilfridi* had been compromised, and that it had been revised by its author 'at a time of crisis' in the middle of the eighth century.[12] That argument cannot convincingly be upheld: even if these 'contradictions' really were the product of authorial revisions made to serve some pressing need, it is difficult to see why any author would do the job so badly as to render his

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9 P. Fouracre, 'Merovingian History and Merovingian Hagiography', *Past and Present*, no. 127 (1990), pp. 3–38, at 28.

10 D.P. Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life of Wilfrid*', *English Historical Review*, xcviii (1983), pp. 101–14, at 108–9.

11 'quem inueni dignum uirum uestrae praepositionis principatui': Stephen, *VW*, ch. 64, ed. Colgrave, p. 138.

12 Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life*', pp. 106–10.

testimony equivocal at precisely those points he was now trying to insist upon.[13] But Kirby was nevertheless right to recognise that there are unavoidable complexities in Stephen's account of Wilfrid's final wishes for his monasteries, his successors and his jealously guarded wealth.

This article argues that the final chapters of the *Vita Wilfridi* are critical for understanding the contemporary context in which the Life was written, and that this context encourages us to rethink some of our current assumptions about the conditions of the Northumbrian Church in the early eighth century. The enthusiasm with which we have embraced the Life as a corrective to the dominant sources for early Anglo-Saxon history has sometimes led us to take its author's motivations for granted. Stephen is customarily characterised as a 'partisan' writer: an author who wore his heart on his sleeve, and whose passionate loyalties are evident in his every word. This we have connected directly with the conflicts and controversies of his hagiographical subject, and understood Stephen's partisanship as a sign that all those who had once numbered among the bishop's followers during his turbulent career still perceived themselves as a discrete faction within the early eighth-century Church. Because Stephen indicates that those followers had once been numerous and widespread enough to comprise a veritable 'kingdom of churches' (*regnum ecclesiarum*),[14] we have typically understood that this 'Wilfridian' bloc for whom Stephen was writing must have been equally extensive. Interpreting the *Vita Wilfridi* has typically been undertaken, therefore, on the basis that its author can be understood primarily as a mouthpiece for a broader faction within the early eighth-century Church: in Walter Goffart's

[13] Similar doubts are also expressed by Stancliffe, 'Dating Wilfrid's Death', pp. 24–5. J.E. Fraser would accept the case for revision but connect it instead with the murder of King Osred in 716, but this argument does not answer all of Kirby's original suspicions about the text: *From Caledonia to Pictland: Scotland to 795* (Edinburgh, 2009), pp. 265–7, 309.

[14] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 21, ed. Colgrave, p. 42.

estimation, 'a priest from Wilfrid's burial place commissioned by his successors and addressing a Wilfridian audience could hardly have been anything else'.[15] This article re-examines this contention, by returning to the remarkable account of Wilfrid's final years with which Stephen concludes his hagiography. In these closing chapters especially are hints that Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi* was intended to serve interests which lay much closer to home than we have typically supposed. Although Stephen has often been called 'partisan', it may now be time to reconsider exactly whose cause he was most insistently championing.

I

Although Kirby thought that the *Vita Wilfridi* presented 'two contradictory accounts' of Wilfrid's final wishes, that is not quite what Stephen of Ripon was alleging.[16] His claim was rather that the bishop had hidden his intentions from the majority of his monks, entrusting his true plans only to a select few. Secrecy, in fact, defines Wilfrid's actions in this final section of the Life. As Wilfrid left Ripon behind, he made his way into Mercia and met with the heads of his southern houses. 'He met with all of his abbots (*abbates suos omnes*)', wrote Stephen, but apparently still refused to speak openly about the plans made in the treasury at Ripon. Instead, Wilfrid was said to have 'recounted the above-mentioned will in full only to some of them (*quibusdam*)'.[17] Wilfrid's intentions for his diocese had clearly never been public knowledge. Stephen identified only a handful who were privy to the saint's wishes, a tiny part of an entourage which he had previously numbered in the hundreds.[18]

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[15] Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 281.

[16] Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life*', p. 108.

[17] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 65, ed. Colgrave, p. 140.

[18] Cf. Stephen, *VW*, ch. 13, ed. Colgrave, p. 28. The difference is noted also by A. Thacker, 'Priests and Pastoral Care in Early Anglo-Saxon England', in G.H. Brown and L.E. Voigts, eds., *The Study of Medieval Manuscripts of England: Festschrift in Honor of Richard W. Pfaff* (Tempe, AZ, 2010), pp. 187–208, at 197.

Stephen's claim about Wilfrid's secrecy in his final days was bolder than it may at first appear. Internal evidence dates the *Vita Wilfridi* closely to 712 x 714, only a few years after Wilfrid's death in 710, and it is addressed continually and explicitly to the old followers of 'our bishop' (*pontifex noster*).[19] Stephen was therefore narrating recent history to readers who had lived through it. A telling reference to 'our church' at Ripon in his description of the foundation at the monastery, and a general tendency to devote closer attention to Ripon than to any of Wilfrid's other monasteries, strongly suggests that Stephen's primary readership consisted of the very Ripon monks who had been called together by Wilfrid just before he left them, and who had themselves heard the bishop making his public declarations about the future.[20] Yet even as Stephen drew on their recollections, he was quietly asserting that their own memories of events were fundamentally incomplete. They may well have been surprised to read of Wilfrid's diligent care for his legacy in his final days because in 708, only eighteen months before he died, it was something which 'seemed to people to be lacking'.[21] The bishop's reluctance to lay plans for the future had clearly troubled many of his followers at that time: when a sudden illness that year left him delirious and unable to speak, the news prompted a sudden rush as abbots and anchorites poured into Hexham to join in prayer with the brethren there, 'beseeching the Lord to grant him a further period of life—or at least to speak to them, to dispose of his houses and divide his possessions, not to leave us like orphans without abbots'.[22] In 710, those anxieties can hardly have been put aside—not when Wilfrid remained as publicly silent about the future as ever. The concluding chapters of the

[19] Stancliffe establishes that the moonbow seen over Ripon on the anniversary of Wilfrid's death (ch. 68) can be shown from astronomical data to have occurred in the second year after his death, and that the Life must therefore postdate 712; and that since Stephen refers to Ælfflæd, abbess of Whitby, in the present tense (ch. 59), the Life must have been finished before her death in 713 or 714: 'Dating Wilfrid's Death', pp. 22–4. Goffart's earlier claim that there is 'nothing incompatible with composition after the abbess's death', and his re-dating to *c.*720, is hardly the obvious way to read 'fidelissimi testes ... ex quibus est Aelfleda abbatissa et sapientissima uirgo, quae est uere filia regis': cf. *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 281 n. 210.

[20] The greater concern for matters related to Ripon in the Life is noted by Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life*', pp. 110–11. For 'our church' at Ripon, see Stephen, *VW*, ch. 17, ed. Colgrave, p. 36.

[21] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 63, ed. Colgrave, p. 136.

[22] Ibid., ch. 62, p. 134.

Vita Wilfridi thus do more than simply narrate the final deeds of an elderly bishop; in fact, the Life becomes noticeably uninterested in most aspects of Wilfrid's personal conduct in the years between the resolution of his final dispute in 706 and his death in 710. Instead, very explicitly and deliberately, Stephen narrowed his focus to a single issue: the manner in which Wilfrid had 'completely and utterly set right everything which had previously seemed to be lacking during the year and a half after his illness'.[23]

Stephen acknowledged the concerns of Wilfrid's followers, many of whom he must now have counted among his readers, so as to lay them to rest. If they had thought Wilfrid slow to acknowledge that his property would need to be managed after his death, Stephen could now reveal to them that the saint had always been fully aware of the time which remained to order his affairs. According to Stephen, Wilfrid had concluded the private meeting in the treasury of Ripon by making the following declaration to his chosen men: 'I am giving these orders so that when the archangel Michael visits me, he may find me prepared (*paratum inueniat*)'.[24] The explanation was undeveloped, but Stephen knew that his readers would naturally connect it with an event he had described a few chapters earlier, in which it was revealed that the saint had received a vision during a first attack of sickness while he made his way across Francia from Rome.[25] Taken to the town of Meaux, Wilfrid remained on the brink of death for four days, until the archangel Michael appeared to him and announced that, through the prayers of the Virgin Mary and Wilfrid's own followers, his sickness would pass and he would return to England triumphant. 'Several years have been added to your life', the archangel had informed him: 'You must be prepared (*paratus esto*), because in four years' time, I will visit you again'. The vision, like the meeting in the

[23] Ibid., ch. 63, p. 136.
[24] Ibid., ch. 63, p. 138.
[25] Ibid., ch. 56, pp. 120–22.

treasury, had been kept secret by Wilfrid: as soon as he returned to health, he had called for his priest, Acca, and dismissed the other brethren while he told Acca what had happened. As they left Meaux for England, the rest of his entourage remained unaware that the two men possessed certain knowledge about the date of Wilfrid's eventual death. Stephen's story showed that those who feared that Wilfrid might never get around to arranging the future of his diocese were simply insufficiently informed. The saint's access to divine foreknowledge had made him fully aware of both the preparations that needed to be made, and the time which remained to make them. Understood in this way, there had been no hesitancy in Wilfrid's last years, only the timely fulfilment of a divine command.

The degree to which Wilfrid's access to prophetic foreknowledge underpins the entire final sequence of the *Vita Wilfridi* has not generally been recognised. Yet Stephen himself was acutely aware that the actions attributed to the aged Wilfrid could only be understood as those of a man granted certain knowledge of his death. When the saint drew some of his followers aside to entrust them with his will, 'it was as if by the spirit of prophecy (*quasi prophetiae spiritu*) he was dividing inheritance among his heirs before his death' or 'as though he foresaw his death (*quasi praesciens obitum suum*)'.[26] These authorial asides are more telling that they at first appear. We have tended to assume that Wilfrid was visibly close to death in his last months, fully aware of the short time which now remained to him. For Stephen to have offered his fellow monks a prophetic explanation instead of a more mundane appeal to advanced age or failing health, however, suggests that the bishop's frailty had not been evident at the time. Our sense of Wilfrid's predictable, visible decline is really a product of the narrative momentum in these final chapters. The Life obscures the true passage of time with short statements that simultaneously recollect Wilfrid's angelic prophecy and anticipate

[26] Ibid., ch. 65, p. 140.

its fulfilment.[27] 'The joy of this age will be mixed with sorrow, and all things look towards the end', writes Stephen, moving abruptly from Wilfrid's restoration to his see in the year 706 to the relapse of sickness in 708: 'For the time that the archangel Michael had foretold was approaching'.[28] A further eighteen months slip by in a single sentence.[29] By the time Wilfrid begins to prepare for his death, the reader has received so many indications of its approach that his actions make complete sense, as if he were already on his deathbed. But this is teleology, a narrative conceit which depends on anticipation and forewarning to carry it along. Wilfrid's last day at Ripon was very far from being his last day in life, and a long tour of his southern monasteries followed. Although the Life does not allow us to estimate how long Wilfrid spent on the road, it is clearly incorrect to talk about his activities at Ripon as if they were conducted 'on his deathbed' or 'in his last hours'. The fact that so many modern historians have sometimes mistakenly described them in those terms is an eloquent testimony to the quiet efficiency of Stephen's rhetoric in this latter part of the *Vita Wilfridi*.[30] Once we recognise that Stephen's story of a dying bishop and his long-delayed yet timely preparations for his successors is inextricable from the story of an angelic prophecy which frames, propels and justifies it, we are then forced to look at the whole story with new eyes.

Whatever Wilfrid might actually have said in the town of Meaux when he regained consciousness after several days of illness, the idea that he awoke knowing that he had only

[27] It is for this reason that attempts to fix Stephen's account into a firm chronology have often run into difficulties: cf. Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life*', pp. 112–14.

[28] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 62, ed. Colgrave, p. 134.

[29] Ibid., ch. 63, p. 136: 'And so our holy bishop lived, to the joy of his people and in perfect peace, and completely settled during the year and a half after his illness all those things which were thought by men to be lacking'.

[30] Cf. P. Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf* and the Conversion of the Anglo-Saxon Aristocracy', in R.T. Farrell, ed., *Bede and Anglo-Saxon England* (British Archaeological Reports, 46; Oxford, 1978), pp. 32–95, at 55; W.T. Foley, *Images of Sanctity in Eddius Stephanus' Life of Bishop Wilfrid, an Early English Saint's Life* (Lewiston, NY, 1992), p. 65; S. Foot, 'Church and Monastery in Bede's Northumbria', in S. DeGregorio, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 54–68, at 63; J.L. Nelson, 'The Settings of the Gift in the Reign of Charlemagne', in W. Davies and P. Fouracre, eds., *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 89–115, at 131; Thacker, 'Priests and Pastoral Care', p. 197.

four more years to live can only be classed as a retrospective fiction. The episode belongs to a category of miracle-story that dealt with aspects of a saint's career which proved difficult, or inconvenient, to explain by ordinary means. Jonas of Bobbio's seventh-century Life of St Columbanus provides a particularly good example, in its explanation of why Columbanus had shown such limited interest in missionary work. It was not that the saint had been negligent, said Jonas, but rather because an angel had appeared to him in a secret vision just as he was thinking of seeking out the pagan Slavs, and dissuaded him from the path he was about to take.[31] As Ian Wood has shown through a comparison with Columbanus' own views on mission, as expressed in his letters, the story 'looks like a *post eventum* attempt to justify the saint's failure to move east from Bregenz to the Slavs', undertaken by a hagiographer who was 'doing his best to give a missionary twist' to a life which had been lived according to radically different priorities.[32] Of course, not every hagiographer who ascribed their saint's behaviour to a supernatural impetus had necessarily created the story out of whole cloth. When St Patrick's hagiographer Muirchú spoke about revelations made by an angel named Victoricus, 'who had foretold everything to Patrick before it happened', he was expanding on claims which we do in fact find expressed in Patrick's own writings, as he sought to justify his actions to his critics.[33] Saints' Lives which rationalised the deeds of their protagonists by appealing to prophetic revelations fell therefore into two categories: those which engaged in retrospective fabrication prompted by contemporary needs, and those which drew ultimately

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[31] Jonas, *Vita S. Columbani*, I. 27, ed. B. Krusch, *Ionae vitae sanctorum Columbani, Vedastis, Iohannis*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, XXXVII (Hanover, 1905), pp. 216–17.

[32] I.N. Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050* (Harlow, 2001), p. 38. For similar stories, see also R. Sowerby, *Angels in Early Medieval England* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 159–60.

[33] Patrick, *Confessio*, ch. 23, ed. R.P.C Hanson and C. Blanc, *Saint Patrick. Confession et Lettre à Coroticus*, Sources Chrétiennes, ccxlix (1978), pp. 94–6; Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, I. 1 and I. 7, ed. L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, Scriptores latini Hiberniae, x (1979), pp. 66–8, 70–72. See further J.F. Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 25–39, 59–60.

(if not always faithfully) on the explanations which the saints themselves had offered during their own lifetimes.

Readers of the *Vita Wilfridi* have tended to assume that Stephen's account of Wilfrid's vision must fall into the latter category, since Stephen named Wilfrid's priest, Acca, as a witness to the saint's words. At the time of the Life's composition, Acca was one of the leading figures of the early eighth-century Church, having succeeded to the bishopric of Hexham after Wilfrid's death. He was, moreover, Stephen's literary patron, and had commissioned the writing of the *Vita Wilfridi* along with Tatberht, the new abbot of Ripon.[34] It is probable, therefore, that the story of Wilfrid's vision came directly from Acca himself. Even historians who have agreed that Stephen's work is often 'so much exaggerated as to lead one to distrust [his] fidelity' have nevertheless stated that anything that might be attributed directly to Acca 'deserves the more confidence'.[35] We have tended to think of Acca's role in the creation of the *Vita Wilfridi* in wholly passive terms, characterising him as a supplier of valuable anecdotes which Stephen might choose to preserve or to neglect.[36] Attempts have therefore been made to 'diagnose' Wilfrid's illness on the basis of the respectably accredited account of his vision at Meaux, or to explain why a seventh-century bishop might have found himself thinking of the Virgin Mary and the archangel Michael in his fevered sleep.[37] Knowing from Bede that Acca was in the habit of retelling miracle-

[34] Stephen, *VW*, preface, ed. Colgrave, p. 2.

[35] The opinions are those of R.L. Poole, who nevertheless took Bede to be a better guide to Acca's reminiscences than Stephen: 'St. Wilfrid and the See of Ripon', *English Historical Review*, xxxiv (1919), pp. 1–24, at 5. Scholars who have placed more trust in Stephen's historicity have often done so on the basis of his 'firsthand access to [Wilfrid's] most intimate companions': Foley, *Images of Sanctity*, pp. 18–20; likewise Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, pp. 129–30, and A. Hicklin, 'Exiles and the Exilic Experience in Stephen of Ripon's *Vita Sancti Wilfridi*', in M. Coombe, A. Mouron and C. Whitehead, eds., *Saints of North-East England, 600–1500* (Turnhout, 2017), pp. 89–110, at 90.

[36] *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, p. xi.

[37] D.A.E. Pelteret, 'Travel between England and Italy in the Early Middle Ages', in H. Sauer and J. Story, eds., *Anglo-Saxon England and the Continent* (Tempe, AZ, 2011), pp. 245–74, at 246–7, 269; É. Ó Carragáin and A. Thacker, 'Wilfrid in Rome', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 212–30, at 227–9.

stories involving people he had met, it is easy to suppose that 'Acca's lively interest in the visionary' is sufficient explanation for why this particular tale was told.[38]

Such conclusions overlook the considerable personal interest which Acca had in his story and its outcome. Stephen of Ripon did not hide the fact that Wilfrid had never publicly named Acca as his successor at Hexham. Instead, Wilfrid had apparently revealed his wishes for the future of Hexham in yet another secret proclamation, this one made solely to his priest, Tatberht, during a quiet horse-ride shortly before his death:

> Wilfrid had earlier, in conversation, narrated the whole of his life to the priest Tatberht, as though on that day, as they were riding down the road, he foresaw his death. Moreover, he recounted all the lands in various places which he had previously given to abbots or which he now decreed to be given—such as it was with the monastery of Hexham, which he ordered to be given to the priest Acca to possess, a man of blessed memory who is, by the grace of God, bishop after him.[39]

Two otherwise unverifiable stories intersect here: a story about an oral will divulged only to Tatberht the priest in the presence of no other witnesses, and described as the act of a man who 'foresaw his own death'; and a story about the vision of the archangel Michael divulged only to Acca in the presence of no other witnesses, which identified the source of Wilfrid's incredible ability accurately to foresee future events. These two men were, let us recall, the patrons who had commissioned Stephen to write the *Vita Wilfridi*; we must therefore assume that Stephen was here dependent on what they themselves now said about these events, for Acca had been alone with Wilfrid when he heard about the archangel's prophecy, just as

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[38] Kirby, 'Bede, Eddius Stephanus and the *Life*', p. 112. Two stories in Bede's Ecclesiastical History are attributed to things 'which the most reverend Bishop Acca is wont to relate': *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [hereafter *HE*], III. 13 and IV. 14, ed. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), pp. 252, 376.

[39] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 65, ed. Colgrave, p. 140.

Tatberht had been alone when he was entrusted with Wilfrid's oral will. The stories supported and justified one another, with Acca's explaining how a vision had led to Wilfrid naming Tatberht as the next abbot of Ripon in the meeting in the monastic treasury, and Tatberht's explaining how Wilfrid was once suddenly moved to bestow Hexham upon Acca. The elevated positions which the two men now held were each justified by the stories told by the other, in such a way as to make the whole account of Wilfrid's bequests entirely circular. We ought to find it suspicious that the two 'best' witnesses to Wilfrid's prophetic final deeds also happened to be the two chief beneficiaries of Wilfrid's belated concern for the future inheritance of his ecclesiastical patrimony, and should wonder whether the whole sequence of events is in large part a fabrication, fashioned by men who stood to gain materially from their fiction.

To read the Life in this way is, to some extent, to read it 'against the grain', in that my conclusions differ from those which its creators would wish us to draw; but it is not, I hope, the product of cherry-picking certain details at the expense of others. If I have emphasised the inseparability of the prophetic and the mundane that runs through the final chapters of Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi*, it is because the text itself insists upon the connection of those two strands. We cannot pretend that it is otherwise, and hope that the Life provides a trustworthy account overlaid with only the most minimal sheen of the supernatural. As Stephen was aware, prophetic revelation was all that stopped the whole story from becoming deeply improbable. Without it, he would have been forced to assert that, although Wilfrid had always intended to divide his wealth and his monastic titles between his followers, he gave no outward indication of his wishes even after at least two attacks of near-fatal illness, nor did he issue them on his deathbed, but fortuitously spent the weeks which would turn out to be his last making all the necessary arrangements in a flurry of secret activity. Put so baldly, these

claims were barely credible. Stephen was asking his readers to set aside their own memories of their bishop: members of the Mercian houses which Wilfrid had visited in the spring of 710, but who had never heard plans for the imminent division of his wealth; the monks of Ripon, who last remembered their leader announcing a journey to find a new *praepositus* for their monastery, but were now being told that he had already named his heir and knew that he would never return. Their own experiences seemed to refute Stephen's story, and so Stephen offered them an undercurrent of prophetically motivated actions intended to make them revise their previous sense of events. In other words, the entire conclusion of the *Vita Wilfridi* depends on accepting its assurance that Wilfrid really had been able to predict his own death. Even if Stephen had not attributed the source of Wilfrid's foreknowledge to an angelic visitation, this is a notion that we ought rightly to question.

II

Contemporaries must have reacted with considerable surprise when the mutually supporting claims of Acca and Tatberht were first aired. Some would doubtless have asked why these things had not been made known earlier, and by Bishop Wilfrid himself. When one of Acca's eighth-century correspondents heard the story of the vision at Meaux, he thought it likely that Wilfrid had probably sworn Acca to silence about the vision when it had happened. That correspondent was the Jarrow monk Bede, who repeated the story of Wilfrid's vision of the archangel Michael at Meaux in his *Historia ecclesiastica*.[40] The substance of Bede's abbreviated rendition conformed in most respects to Stephen's earlier telling, except for the declaration that Wilfrid had only revealed his vision to Acca after first asking him 'to keep

[40] Attempts to deduce Bede's attitude towards Wilfrid on the basis of his retelling of the *Vita Wilfridi* are many and varied. See especially Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, pp. 307–24; N.J. Higham, 'Wilfrid and Bede's *Historia*', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 54–66; C. Grocock, 'Wilfrid, Benedict Biscop, and Bede—the Monk who Knew too Much?', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 93–111.

silent, until I know what God intends for me'.[41] It is a conventional enough instruction to find issuing from a saint's mouth in an early medieval text; and we should certainly not be too quick to suppose that the respect which Bede openly declared for Acca elsewhere in his writings therefore makes him a 'better' guide to Acca's own views on the subject than Stephen.[42] But it is curious that the claim that Acca had been sworn to silence is the only addition of any substance which Bede made to the tale. If nothing else, it suggests something of the suddenness with which the story emerged, fully formed, after Wilfrid's death.

Stephen of Ripon chose to say nothing about the manner in which Acca and Tatberht first advanced their claims. He presented them simply stepping into the positions which had been privately prepared for them as soon as Wilfrid breathed his last. One of them was there beside Wilfrid when he died at Oundle, and Stephen imagined the others who accompanied him looking at once from the dead bishop to his chosen heir:

> Our holy bishop sent forth his spirit, and everyone was dumbstruck for a moment when they heard a sound like birds arriving, as a cloud of witnesses can confirm. They accepted the chosen abbot, who was accustomed to do many good works for the love of his father, our holy bishop. For he decided to celebrate a private mass for him every day and to celebrate a holy feast every Thursday (the day on which the bishop died) as if it were a Sunday; and to mark the anniversary of the bishop's death, for all the days of his life, by dividing his whole share of the tithe of the herds and flocks among the poor of his people to the glory of God, in addition to those daily alms which he was accustomed to give to God and man, for the sake of his soul and the soul of his bishop.[43]

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41 Bede, *HE*, V. 19, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 526.

42 For Bede and Acca, see variously D. Whitelock, 'Bede and his Teachers and Friends', in G. Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 19–39, at 26–7; C. Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy: Bede, Acca, and the Relationship between Stephen's *Life of St Wilfrid* and the Early Prose Lives of St Cuthbert', *Anglo-Saxon England*, xli (2012), pp. 7–39, at 35–6; P. Hilliard, 'Acca of Hexham through the Eyes of Bede', *Early Medieval Europe*, xxvi (2018), pp. 440–61.

43 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 65, ed. Colgrave, pp. 140–42.

Strange as it may seem, Stephen was here talking not about Oundle itself, but about Ripon and about his patron, the new abbot, Tatberht. It is easy for us now to mistake his meaning, and to suppose that the 'chosen abbot' described here was a new abbot of the monastery in which Wilfrid's death had taken place. But although some previous historians have understood the passage solely in reference to that institution, Bede elsewhere indicates that Oundle was already 'under the governance of Abbot Cuthbald' when Wilfrid reached the monastery.[44] Nor does it seem likely that the passage refers to Acca, as a recent article by Paul Hilliard has maintained, since Stephen gives no indication in these chapters that Acca was in fact present on Wilfrid's final journey.[45] Instead, although Wilfrid was said to have met with a great many monks and abbots during his journey, the Life identified by name only Tatberht in those final days: it is he alone whom Stephen describes riding beside the aged bishop shortly before his death, and whom the Life shows us being welcomed back to Ripon as Wilfrid's 'worthy heir' when the saint's body had been returned for burial.[46] The most natural reading, therefore, is that the 'chosen abbot' who stepped forward after the bishop's death should be identified as Tatberht, comporting himself immediately in the manner that might be expected from Wilfrid's 'worthy heir'. The ambiguity which modern readers face in identifying the 'chosen abbot' in this scene would not, however, have been shared by the Ripon monks who constituted Stephen's most immediate audience. The programme of daily commemorations described here was the particular practice of Ripon, as indeed Stephen had already noted in a previous chapter.[47] In his account of Wilfrid's death, therefore, Stephen was also showing his readers at Ripon the origins of a novel programme of veneration which

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[44] Bede, *HE*, V. 19, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 528. Cf. S. Foot, 'Wilfrid's Monastic Empire', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 27–39, at 30; M. Capper, 'Prelates and Politics: Wilfrid, Oundle and the "Middle Angles"', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 260–74, at 274.

[45] Hilliard, 'Acca of Hexham', pp. 448–50; likewise C. Cubitt, 'The Chronology of Stephen's Life of Wilfrid', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 334–47, at 339.

[46] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 66, ed. Colgrave, p. 142. The same identification is made by A. Thacker, 'Wilfrid, his Cult and his Biographer', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 1–16, at 1.

[47] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 17, ed. Colgrave, p. 36.

they were meant to recognise as their own. His intention was to emphasise the strength of the connection between Wilfrid and his abbatial successor, Tatberht, revealing the exemplary devotion which Tatberht had demonstrated from the very moment of Wilfrid's death, and the exceptional care which he had instantly shown for the preservation of the bishop's memory. Stephen's point was that Tatberht had immediately exhibited the promise which Wilfrid had seen in him, by taking up a role which had been secretly bestowed upon him. The fact that the community at Ripon had been unaware of that bequest was, Stephen alleged, immaterial. They could now see, from the evidence of the Life, both that their own memories of Wilfrid were deficient in several regards, and that they should now trust those who told a fuller story about the prophetic bishop and his covert arrangements for his successors.

Wilfrid's old followers were also being encouraged to subscribe to a particular vision of ecclesiastical appointment and inheritance. One might almost say that the *Vita Wilfridi* is in fact a treatise on succession, and on the rightful acquisition and transfer of office. Concerns with these issues do not simply emerge in the final chapters which deal with Wilfrid's own successors. In fact, they underpin a great deal of the Life's account of the seventh- and eighth-century world which Wilfrid inhabited. To some extent, we have always recognised this: much of the *Vita Wilfridi*'s distinctive character comes from the way that it 'systematically fixes upon political and territorial disputes' and 'foregrounds the significance of the possession and transmission of land and power', as Scott Thompson Smith has recently emphasised.[48] But we have typically understood these recurrent concerns to be a reflex of Wilfrid's own fixations and preoccupations—the worldly concerns of a worldly man—rather than as a deliberate part of his hagiographer's textual design. This is, I think, to mistake the true purpose of these aspects of the *Vita Wilfridi*. They allowed Stephen of Ripon to educate

[48] S.T. Smith, '*Inextricabilis dissensio*: Property, Dispute, and Sanctity in the *Vita S. Wilfridi*', *Medieval Studies*, lxxiv (2012), pp. 163–96, at 165.

his readers about the proper etiquette of giving and receiving ecclesiastical office. Through a combination of moral lessons, exemplary stories and biblical analogies, Stephen sought to provide the ethical foundations for the manner in which he would eventually show Tatberht and Acca succeeding to their respective positions at Ripon and Hexham.

How, for instance, ought a person to react when others sought to bestow elevated rank upon them? To some in early eighth-century Northumbria, it was best to resist any such attempt as strenuously as one was able. This was a well-established view, for which several venerable hagiographical exemplars offered support.[49] It had recently received renewed approval from an anonymous monk of Lindisfarne who penned a Life of St Cuthbert in the years around 700, and who wrote favourably about Cuthbert being dragged off to his episcopal ordination 'unwillingly and under compulsion, weeping and wailing'.[50] Stephen of Ripon was well aware that this represented a powerful demonstration of saintly humility, since he had a copy of the *Vita Cuthberti* open in front of him when he wrote his own account of the way that Wilfrid, too, was elevated to the episcopate. But, as Clare Stancliffe has shown, Stephen sought to offer a different guide to the proper behaviour of episcopal nominees.[51] Wilfrid at first refused just as Cuthbert had done, 'but at last became obedient (*obediens factus est*) and did not wish to flee from God's blessing'.[52] Although declarations of humility reflected well on episcopal nominees, obedience was a higher virtue. For someone to 'humble himself and become obedient' was to be not only virtuous but also Christ-like, acting in imitation of the words of Philippians 2:8 ('humiliauit semetipsum factus

[49] See, for example, Sulpicius Severus, *Vita S. Martini*, ch. 9, ed. J. Fontaine, *Sulpice Sévère. Vie de Saint Martin*, Sources Chrétiennes, cxxxiii–cxxxv (3 vols., 1967–9), i. 270; Possidius, *Vita S. Augustini*, ch. 4, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen, *Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Ambrogio, Vita di Agostino* (Milan, 1975), pp. 138–40.

[50] *Vita S. Cuthberti auctore anonymo*, IV. 1, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert: A Life by an Anonymous Monk of Lindisfarne and Bede's Prose Life* (Cambridge, 1940), p. 110.

[51] Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 15–17.

[52] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 11, ed. Colgrave, p. 24.

obediens').[53] This was a lesson which Stephen's readers might learn, and which they might also see being fulfilled in the two men who would later profess to be acting in obedience with Wilfrid's own requests.

To act in obedience with another's wishes and to enter into an agreement with them made the whole process of nomination, election and appointment closely resemble other forms of interpersonal pledges and promises. Stephen had lessons to offer about these matters too, and he voiced them in a short but pointed episode about Wilfrid's short period of exile in Frisia. The didactic quality of this episode has recently been emphasised by James Palmer, who notes the careful way in which it sought 'to provide lessons about honour and friendship'.[54] The central teachings were placed into the mouth of a Frisian leader named Aldgisl, who had been approached by a group of Frankish messengers seeking his aid in capturing or killing the exiled bishop. Aldgisl rejected their request and rebuked the messengers—not, as we might have expected, because plots to murder bishops were obviously impious, but rather on the specific grounds that it would require him to break his word: 'May the Creator of [all] things tear down and destroy, devour and uproot the realm and life of the one who perjures himself before God and does not keep the agreement he has made'.[55] The moral of the story mattered to Stephen more than the details of the plot itself: the episode is in other respects short and, in narrative terms, undeveloped. The words which he placed into Aldgisl's mouth were not, therefore, mere platitudes appended to some larger story. Rather, as Palmer has argued, Aldgisl's observations about the making and breaking of promises 'were the real issue here'.[56] For Palmer, this thematic strand within the Life allowed

[53] Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', p. 17.
[54] J.T. Palmer, 'Wilfrid and the Frisians', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 231–42, at 241.
[55] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 27, ed. Colgrave, p. 54. Related injunctions are made by other acquaintances of Wilfrid in the chapter which follows: ch. 28, pp. 54–6.
[56] Palmer, 'Wilfrid and the Frisians', pp. 233–4.

Stephen to offer 'a lesson for the descendants of kings who had been so hostile to Wilfrid'.[57] But Aldgisl's moral outrage encompassed all forms of broken promises, and so applied equally to agreements made outside the secular world. Stephen showed that Wilfrid himself had suffered from infringements of exactly this kind, whenever his enemies sought to strip him of duties which he had obediently received from others. Towards the end of his life, Wilfrid would complain to Pope John VI about the way that his efforts to carry out the duties with which he had been entrusted by kings and popes were frequently countered by those who 'presumed, either through envy or wicked greed, [to act] contrary to your orders and to the wishes of the king'.[58] Even noble savages like the Frisian Aldgisl knew that those who compelled others to break their agreements and renege on their pledges deserved censure.

In Stephen's telling, much of Wilfrid's career had been shaped by his willingness to act in 'humble obedience' to those who sought to bestow honours upon him, and by his determination to seek redress whenever others attempted to intrude upon those obedient agreements. The final message of the Life was that, as arduous as the pursuit of those two principles had been, ultimately God himself had assisted Wilfrid in fulfilling them. One by one, Stephen traced the fate of each of Wilfrid's opponents as they either sought forgiveness for standing against him, as Archbishop Theodore was said to have done, or instead met with 'divine vengeance' for persisting in their obstinacy, as the Northumbrian king Aldfrith discovered to his cost when sickness ultimately brought him to death.[59] Stephen's account of Wilfrid's turbulent career is more, therefore, than a list of the grievances suffered by a controversial bishop. It is also fundamentally the account of the process by which these challengers were finally seen off or won over. When he described the synod of Nidd at which

[57] Ibid., p. 234.
[58] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 51, ed. Colgrave, p. 106.
[59] Ibid., chs. 43 and 58–9, pp. 86–90, 124–6.

Wilfrid was at last restored to respectability within the Northumbrian Church in 706, Stephen rejoiced in the way that the survivors of the conflict finally 'gave thanks to God for all this holy blessedness, and went back to their homes in the peace of Christ'.[60] Modern readers have always noted the euphemistic gloss which these words applied to the reality of Wilfrid's situation in his final years. To Bertram Colgrave, it seemed that 'actually Wilfrid had gained nothing from his appeals to Rome'; and Stephen's positivity certainly does disguise the significant losses which Wilfrid had suffered and the limited jurisdiction to which he was now restored.[61] But this forced positivity served a crucial purpose for Stephen. It made Wilfrid emerge as if he had been wholly vindicated, and the principles by which he had attained and exercised ecclesiastical office affirmed by the outcome of events.

Stephen intended his readers to learn the lesson. The events of Wilfrid's life had shown that God favoured those who accepted what was given to them with 'humble obedience', and that those who sought to come between the donor and their nominee risked divine disapproval. Now Stephen's readers faced new leaders, and a strange story about the prophetic visions and secret arrangements which had led to their appointment. We ought to see the Life which those leaders commissioned from Stephen the priest as an essential part of their attempt to convince Wilfrid's old followers about the claims which they now advanced after the aged bishop's death. The text not only promoted their claims, but also sought to shape the reactions of their contemporaries as it recalled relevant events from the recent past. The Life promised that any who might intend 'to snatch off another bishop's see like a thief', like those who briefly tried to replace Wilfrid with Chad in the 660s, would ultimately find

[60] Ibid., ch. 60, p. 132.

[61] *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, p. 184; D.H. Farmer, 'Saint Wilfrid', in D.P. Kirby, ed., *Saint Wilfrid at Hexham* (Newcastle, 1974), pp. 35–59, at 54–5; Smith, '*Intextricabilis dissensio*', pp. 183–4.

that their efforts were in vain.[62] Although Stephen attributed little personal blame to Chad himself in his account of these events, exonerating him for the way that he later showed proper 'obedience to the bishops', the episode demonstrated that usurpation achieved no lasting success.[63] Events from later in Wilfrid's life reaffirmed the message: the attempt to break up Wilfrid's extended diocese in 678 was again cast by Stephen as an attempt by others to 'defraud him like thieves', which ended only with the 'expulsion' of the interlopers.[64] Where external evidence exists, it often reveals that Wilfrid's restorations were seldom as complete as Stephen suggests, and may not in reality have resulted in the immediate dismissal of those who had 'usurped' Wilfrid's positions.[65] But for Stephen, this repeated pattern of 'theft' and 'restoration' held substantial explanatory power. It was a pattern which had been established in the biblical past—'just like John the apostle and evangelist returning to Ephesus', he declared—and which was not, therefore, unique to Wilfrid's own travails.[66] One wonders whether Stephen feared the resurgence of fresh usurpation in his own day, given the precarious supports on which his patrons had placed their own claims to ecclesiastical office. The way that the Life returns to the themes of rightful restoration and divine vengeance certainly seems ideally suited to warning off potential challengers.

Stephen was aware that the claims of his patrons could indeed have been vulnerable to challenges, given that so much of their argument depended on private conversations and secret meetings. This too he sought to justify, through a carefully judged appeal to biblical history. In the final years of his life, Stephen observed, Wilfrid had in many ways become

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62 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 15, ed. Colgrave, p. 32.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., chs. 24 and 44, pp. 48 and 90.

65 Cf. *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, ed. Colgrave, p. 178; C. Cubitt, 'Wilfrid's Usurping Bishops: Episcopal Elections in Anglo-Saxon England, *c.*600–*c.*800', *Northern History*, xxv (1989), pp. 18–38, esp. 20; Cubitt, 'St Wilfrid', pp. 315–16.

66 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 44, ed. Colgrave, p. 90.

comparable to Hezekiah, the ancient king of Judah, whose life had also been extended through heavenly dispensation after a period of sickness.[67] Stephen seems to have had a particular 'predilection for biblical typology' that went beyond the normal habits of other early medieval hagiographers.[68] Key moments in Wilfrid's life were furnished with biblical analogies, which marked them out for the reader as especially significant or meaningful by likening the saint explicitly to a particular figure from scripture. Stephen used this technique more selectively in his account of Wilfrid's later years than in his treatment of the saint's early career; but the miraculous extension of a human life was obviously a subject worth highlighting, and Stephen made sure to alert his readers to the clear biblical parallel. 'Through the intercession of St Mary, mother of God, and through the prayers of his followers,' Stephen enthused as he concluded his account of the bishop's vision at Meaux, 'years of life had been added to our bishop—just as fifteen years were added to the life of Hezekiah, king of Judah'.[69]

If nothing else, the analogy with Hezekiah served to indicate that this undeniably unusual occurrence did indeed conform to known events from the biblical past. But attentive readers ought to have been disquieted by the comparison with the king of Judah too.[70] The news of Hezekiah's sickness had attracted visitors from Babylon, and the manner in which the king had received them signalled the ruin of his kingdom. Significantly, the central act happened in a treasury:

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67 Ibid., ch. 56, p. 122. Cf. 2 Kings 20: 1–6.

68 M.D. Laynesmith, 'Stephen of Ripon and the Bible: Allegorical and Typological Interpretations of the *Life of St Wilfrid*', *Early Medieval Europe*, ix (2000), pp. 163–82, at 164. See also Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, pp. 139–41; Foley, *Images of Sanctity*, pp. 40–46; M. Laynesmith, 'Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in the *Life of Wilfrid*', in Higham, ed., *Wilfrid*, pp. 67–79

69 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 56, p. 122.

70 My analysis here builds on observations first made by Smith, '*Inextricabilis dissensio*', p. 189, whose conclusions nevertheless differ somewhat from mine.

> At that time, King Merodach-baladan son of Baladan of Babylon sent envoys with letters and a present to Hezekiah, for he had heard that Hezekiah had been sick. Hezekiah welcomed them; he showed them all his treasure house, the silver, the gold, the spices, the precious oil, his armoury, all that was found in his storehouses; there was nothing in his house or in all his realm that Hezekiah did not show them. Then the prophet Isaiah ... said to Hezekiah, 'Hear the word of the Lord: days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left'.[71]

The reasons for thinking that Wilfrid was indeed just like Hezekiah only multiplied as Stephen led his readers away from the miraculous extension to Wilfrid's life, onwards to the arrival of visitors from afar who had heard news of sickness, and at last into the bishop's own treasury at Ripon. But just as it seemed that the aged Wilfrid might have been re-enacting the role of a biblical king leading his kingdom to ruin, Stephen changed the script. Where Hezekiah had been unconcerned with the fate of his kingdom after his death, incautiously opening up his treasury and shrugging off the prophet Isaiah's warning to think about the future ('For he thought, "Why not, if there will be peace and security in my days?"'), Wilfrid sought to secure a much more prosperous future for his heirs.[72] His treasury was opened only to the 'very faithful brothers whom he had invited', and even the well-wishers who sought him out during his sickness were kept from knowing his mind.[73] Perhaps such secrecy was excessive; but Hezekiah's example showed the ruin which attended those who were incautious in such affairs. Understood in this way, the secrecy with which Wilfrid had made his final arrangements was not only comprehensible, but also laudable.

The *Vita Wilfridi* sought to convince its readers of several interlocking truths: that plans for the future were best made in secret; that accepting ecclesiastical office was foremost a matter of obedience; that arrangements made between donors and recipients were

[71] 2 Kings 20: 12–18.
[72] 2 Kings 20: 19.
[73] Stephen, *VW*, chs. 62–3, ed. Colgrave, pp. 134–8.

inviolable; and that known events in both the biblical past and recent times affirmed the veracity of these statements. According to the *vita*, St Wilfrid himself had lived by such principles. To challenge them was therefore also to challenge Wilfrid's memory. Perhaps the claims of Tatberht and Acca had caused surprise when they were first voiced, but they could not now be seriously questioned without also calling into doubt the veracity of the text which also offered proof 'that our holy bishop [was] with God and his saints'.[74]

III

Walter Goffart was right to say that when Wilfrid became 'the hero of a biography, he became the stalking-horse for the strivings of other men'.[75] In our efforts to identify exactly what those other men were striving for, we have looked primarily for objectives which lay outside the 'kingdom of churches' that Wilfrid had left behind. One of the last images which Stephen gives us of Wilfrid's old followers is that of a community in need of reassurance, invoking its deceased patron while 'fearing the snares of old enemies'.[76] Those enemies could take many forms. Some were clearly intent on the settling of old scores, such as the armed band of exiled noblemen who attacked the monastery of Oundle 'on account of a wrong done to them'.[77] Others seem to have harboured opposition of a more ideological nature. The tensions stirred up in Wilfrid's conflicts with his ecclesiastical peers had not yet subsided, and can be detected particularly in the texts associated with the monastery at Lindisfarne. The changing character of these tensions has been followed closely in a probing article by Clare Stancliffe, which draws attention to key passages from the Lives of the early Northumbrian saints which suggest that 'the division between the Wilfridians and the Lindisfarne community did indeed continue right through the first three decades of the eighth

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74 Ibid., ch. 66, p. 142.
75 Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 290.
76 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 68, ed. Colgrave, p. 146.
77 Ibid., ch. 67, p. 144, on which see also Thacker, 'Wilfrid, his Cult and his Biographer', p. 14.

century'.[78] Stephen of Ripon was hardly inattentive to this wider context of dispute and disagreement. He had engaged in close study of writings produced at Lindisfarne, and manipulated key episodes of that monastery's Life of St Cuthbert more than once in his own *vita*. As Stancliffe has shown, Stephen's dialogue with the *Vita Cuthberti* at those moments 'is far from innocent', and had the effect of drawing attention to matters of particular contention, such as forms of tonsuring and the exercise of episcopal office.[79] Wilfrid's death had not brought old enmities to an end, and Stephen closed his work with assurances that the saint would 'prove to be the guardian of our defence' in whatever fresh trouble might await his successors.[80]

Although the combative tone of the *Vita Wilfridi* in these regards certainly indicates the readiness of Wilfrid's successors to engage once more in criticism of 'old enemies', the efforts which the Life made to fashion a defence for the recent actions of its patrons suggest that they had no less work to do on the home front. One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Life, and one of the features which has made Stephen look all the more transparently partisan, is its continual and insistent address to 'we brothers' (*nos fratres*), the old followers of 'our bishop' (*pontifex noster*).[81] It is easy to be misled by this repeated refrain and to assume that the Life was therefore written for an audience already predisposed to assent to its every word. But monasteries were not immune from factionalism, as other nearby communities admitted in their own accounts of their founders and abbots. The various early eighth-century histories of the abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow, for instance, are punctuated by injunctions against division and internal strife, justified by creative appeals to biblical

78 Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy'; the quoted statement is at p. 37.
79 Ibid., pp. 14–19.
80 Stephen, *VW*, ch. 68, ed. Colgrave, p. 146.
81 Goffart remarks on the 'monotonous' quality of Stephen's writing in this regard: *Narrators of Barbarian History*, p. 282 n. 213. The typical phrases can all be found in *VW*, ch. 1, ed. Colgrave, p. 4.

precedents. Their readers were asked to consider 'the example of the Hebrew people, which became divided against itself through the stupidity of Solomon's son', and told that Christ's observation that 'every kingdom divided against itself shall be made desolate' applied no less forcefully to a religious community.[82] We have tended to think that Wilfrid's followers needed no such reminders, given the rousing way in which his *vita* celebrated the shared history, solidarity and identity of the brethren. But the language of unity appeals not only to the spokespersons of committed partisans. It can also be a vital tool for those who wish to combat profound *dis*unity and quarrelsome infighting. The question which we should therefore ask of Stephen's writing is whether it sought to reflect consensus, or to shape it.

There are indeed indications that Stephen could not take the universal assent of his readers for granted. In his preface to the Life, Stephen expressed his hope that 'those who are going to read [the Life] might put their faith in what it says, laying aside the thousand stings of the envious ancient enemy and ruminating upon that which has been eloquently proclaimed'.[83] Doubtless any hagiographer would have shared the general sentiment and wished for a favourable reaction from their readers—but Stephen's exhortation gains a particular significance from the fact that it constitutes his only 'original comment' in a preface which is otherwise almost a straight copy of the opening to the earlier *Vita Cuthberti*. Who, then, were these readers afflicted by an outpouring of devilish envy? Any monk of Lindisfarne who happened to be reading the Life might justifiably have considered themselves the target, as Clare Stancliffe has suggested, given the way that Stephen had

[82] Bede, *Historia abbatum*, ch. 13 (quoting Luke 11: 17), and *Vita Ceolfridi*, ch. 25 (in reference to 1 Kings 12 and 2 Chron. 10), ed. Grocock and Wood, *Abbots of Wearmouth and Jarrow*, pp. 52, 104. On the nature of the factionalism at Wearmouth–Jarrow, see esp. C. O'Brien, 'Hwætberht, Sicgfrith and the Reforming of Wearmouth and Jarrow', *Early Medieval Europe*, xxv (2017), pp. 301–19.

[83] Stephen, *VW*, preface, ed. Colgrave, p. 2.

inserted these words into a passage drawn entirely from the Life of their own saint.[84] But outsiders were not the only readers who might dissent from the version of events being offered by Stephen. On the matter of the succession at Ripon and Hexham, as we have seen, it was Stephen's more immediate audience of 'fellow brothers' whose memories were most obviously at odds with the claims now being advanced. For them to 'put their faith in what [the Life] says', as Stephen asked of his readers, required them to augment, reconsider and even set aside many of their own recollections. Faced with such a demand, disbelief was surely a distinct possibility. Stephen's characterisation of his dissenting readers was certainly broad enough to encompass critics of his patrons as well as critics of Wilfrid himself. He continued his preface with an observation about the way that criticism tended to afflict those in positions of power most of all, quoting Jerome's statement that 'strength always has its rivals in open places: bolts of lightning strike the tops of mountains'.[85] Was this meant to apply to Wilfrid's experience of high office, or to those who held those same offices now after him? If Jerome's statement identified a universal principle, then presumably there was no difference between the unjust criticism which Wilfrid had suffered at the hands of his enemies and any fresh criticism which might now be voiced against his successors.

We need not therefore require the dissenting readers anticipated in Stephen's preface to be distinct from the audience of his 'fellow brothers' to which he addressed himself in every other chapter of his work. When it came to some of the most recent and novel claims made by the Life, dispute at home was no less likely than criticism from elsewhere. We should therefore be open to the possibility that the *Vita Wilfridi* was envisaged by its creators as a response to the internal affairs of Wilfrid's former monasteries, as much as a contribution

[84] Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 14–15.

[85] Stephen, *VW*, preface, ed. Colgrave, p. 2; quoting Jerome, *Hebraicae quaestiones in libro Geneseos*, preface, ed. P. de Lagarde, Corpus christianorum series latina, lxxii (1959), p. 1. Jerome's image of lightning-struck mountaintops is, in turn, a quotation from Horace, *Odes*, II. 20.

to any wider 'pamphlet war' being waged between the rival cults of the Northumbrian Church.[86] Thanks to the remarkable way that the appearance of the *Vita Wilfridi* prompted the community at Lindisfarne to revise their own saint's Life, and to replace it with a carefully reworked alternative penned by Bede at their request, we have been able to gain a good sense of the sharp back-and-forth of ideas expressed by the hagiographers of Wilfrid and Cuthbert.[87] But although these texts had been produced in, and shaped by, a context of rivalry and criticism, we should not imagine that any of the Lives were conceived as one-dimensional polemics. Bede's rewritten *Vita Cuthberti* can also be understood as an expression of reformist ideals and an attempt to show, as Stancliffe has argued, 'that the pastoral monk-bishop model exemplified by Cuthbert was a viable, indeed a valuable model for episcopacy in contemporary Northumbria'.[88] Stephen of Ripon's *Vita Wilfridi* was perhaps less high-minded, but no less multi-dimensional. It engaged in self-conscious and provocative dialogue with the hagiography of Lindisfarne, but it also worked hard to forestall the possibility of dissent within its own community. Even Stephen's most outwardly bellicose statements were paired with quiet reminders which worked to reassure his fellow monks that their present situation, under their present leaders, enjoyed the particular approval of God. The final image which the Life offered was of the monastery of Ripon encircled by a moonbow, sent by God to indicate that renewed threats from 'old enemies' would be thwarted by 'a wall of divine help around the chosen vineyard of the Lord's family'. They had merited such a sign of divine protection, Stephen explained in his final lines, 'because in

[86] For the characterisation, see A. Thacker, 'Lindisfarne and the Origins of the Cult of St Cuthbert', in G. Bonner, D. Rollason and C. Stancliffe, eds., *St Cuthbert, his Cult and his Community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp. 103–22, at 122; and Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 10–24.

[87] Alongside Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 10–24, cf. also D.P. Kirby, 'The Genesis of a Cult: Cuthbert of Farne and Ecclesiastical Politics in Northumbria in the Late Seventh and Early Eighth Centuries', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xlvi (1995), pp. 383–97, at 396–7; Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, pp. 258–96; Thacker, 'Lindisfarne', pp. 115–22; Thacker, 'Wilfrid, his Cult and his Biographer', pp. 11–13.

[88] Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 36–7. For the place of reformist ideals in Bede's *Vita Cuthberti*, see esp. A. Thacker, 'Bede's Ideal of Reform', in P. Wormald, ed., *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 130–53, at 136–43.

all the kingdoms on both sides of the Humber, our life was spent under chosen abbots'.[89] Not only was this a 'highly defensive image' with which to conclude a saint's Life, as Alan Thacker has noted, it was also surprisingly emphatic about the fact that the monks owed their future security not solely to their saintly protector Wilfrid, but more particularly to the men who had been chosen to succeed him.[90] As his readers finished the Life, Stephen surely meant them to conclude that those men were indeed *abbates electi* in every sense of the phrase.

Understanding the *Vita Wilfridi* in this way has implications for the way in which we have thought about the nature of the eighth-century Northumbrian Church more broadly. It has become conventional to suppose that a discrete 'Wilfridian' identity, shared among all of the bishop's former houses, was preserved after Wilfrid's death in 710, and that these 'Wilfridian' allegiances continued to influence the shape of ecclesiastical politics for decades to come. The actions of individuals who had once counted among Wilfrid's followers and who now exercised authority in their own right, such as Stephen's patrons Bishop Acca and Abbot Tatberht, have in this way been seen as the reflections of the disposition of a larger 'Wilfridian' bloc of affiliated monasteries.[91] It is Stephen who has convinced us that this must have been the case, because of the insistence with which he appealed continually to his readers' sense of collective unity. But if we should indeed understand those appeals primarily as a rhetoric of persuasion, rather than as a simple reflection of the current mood of his brethren, then we must ask whether Stephen was successful in forestalling the dissent which

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89 'quia in omnibus regnis Citra-Ultraque Humbrensium uita nostra sub abbatibus electis utebatur': Stephen, *VW*, ch. 68, ed. Colgrave, pp. 146–8.

90 Thacker, 'Wilfrid, his Cult and his Biographer', pp. 13–14.

91 The most substantial investigations in this mode, although coming to radically dissimilar conclusions about the disposition of the 'Wilfridians' towards others, are Goffart, *Narrators of Barbarian History*, pp. 258–96; N.J. Higham, *(Re-)Reading Bede: The Ecclesiastical History in Context* (London, 2006), pp. 58–69; Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', esp. pp. 24–39; Hilliard, 'Acca of Hexham', esp. pp. 441–4, 460–61.

he and his patrons feared. In the absence of other accounts from Stephen's peers, it is frankly impossible to say; and that should perhaps incline us towards caution in our assessment of whatever 'Wilfridian' resolve persisted under the governance of Wilfrid's successors. The convenience of the label as a shorthand for all those left behind by Wilfrid in 710 may well cause us to overestimate the levels of support which its chief members thought they could rely upon.

As the more elevated of the Life's two patrons, we might suspect that Acca would have been the most natural target for the sort of devilish envy which Stephen's preface anticipated. Stephen is nevertheless noticeably more circumspect in his account of Acca's succession at Hexham than he is about the abbatial arrangements at Ripon. In his report of Wilfrid's instructions for Hexham, Stephen claims nothing more specific than that Wilfrid 'ordered the monastery (*coenobium*) of Hexham to be given to the priest Acca to possess (*in possessionem dare praecepit*)', and that indeed at the present moment Acca 'is, by the grace of God, bishop after him'.[92] As an explanation for Acca's recent and rapid elevation from the priesthood, Stephen's sketch functioned perfectly well. But there were also important jurisdictional implications of 'giving' a monastery which was also the seat of a bishop, which Stephen seems deliberately to have left undefined. Given the way in which he elsewhere strove to support Wilfrid's actions in life with the 'touchstone of orthodoxy' provided by canon law, as Stancliffe has said, the rather opaque wording of this episode may reflect an awareness that canonical legislation forbade bishops to nominate their own successors.[93] But, as Catherine Cubitt has shown from other cases, it was not at all uncommon for seventh- and

[92] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 65, ed. Colgrave, p. 140.

[93] See Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 17–18. Comparison should be made with Stephen's claim that Theodore once intended to make Wilfrid his successor at Canterbury, and Wilfrid urged him to put the matter before a synod—although it is notable that Wilfrid's response falls somewhat short of the outright rejection that we might expect: Stephen, *VW*, ch. 43, ed. Colgrave, p. 86.

eighth-century bishops to name a successor in such a way. Designation by one's predecessor was nevertheless only ever one consideration among many: royal or synodal approval were crucial determinants in some cases, while in others it was the support of the community in which the bishop had his seat which had the greatest impact.[94] Perhaps that is why Stephen not only offered an account of Wilfrid's own instructions for Hexham's future, but also appealed regularly to the demonstrable good works which Acca had done at Hexham since taking up the episcopacy. On several occasions, the Life breaks from its rigid chronology to offer small anticipatory asides about the manner in which Acca continued his predecessor's building work at Hexham, or to enthuse that it is Acca 'who is now bishop of blessed memory by the grace of God', as if there had never been any question over the matter.[95]

The overall effect seems therefore to be less about offering a fully fleshed-out explanation of a recent episcopal succession, than about making Acca's authority over Hexham simply seem self-evident in hindsight. One wonders whether it had seemed just as obvious in 710, when Wilfrid died. If we knew more about Acca's previous connection with Hexham, we might be better placed to judge: he had come to Wilfrid 'in the hope of finding a better way of life' after an early education under Bishop Bosa at York, Bede would later write, but we do not know whether he was always closely associated with Hexham thereafter, or whether there had been others during Wilfrid's lifetime who would have seemed more immediately suitable to succeed Wilfrid.[96] In common with the situation in some of Wilfrid's other monasteries, a *praepositus* presided over Hexham and exercised immediate

[94] See Cubitt, 'Wilfrid's Usurping Bishops', pp. 30–37.

[95] Stephen, *VW*, chs. 22, 56, and 65, ed. Colgrave, pp. 44–6, 122, 140. For the implications of the description of Acca as 'bishop *of blessed memory*', see now Stancliffe, 'Dating Wilfrid's Death', p. 25.

[96] Bede, *HE*, V. 20, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 530–32; *pace* M. Lapidge, 'Acca of Hexham and the Origins of the *Old English Martyrology*', *Analecta Bollandiana*, cxxiii (2005), pp. 29–78, at 67.

responsibility over the brethren while Wilfrid was absent.[97] It seems unlikely that Acca had ever occupied that role, since Stephen refers to him as nothing more elevated than Wilfrid's 'most faithful *presbyter*'.[98] Although Stephen does not identify Wilfrid's *praepositus* at Hexham by name, the unnamed man must surely have been a strong contender for higher rank after Wilfrid's death. Acca's claim to have been 'given' Hexham in some undefined sense was likely, therefore, to have provoked more deliberation among the community than Stephen admits. If Paul Hilliard is right to suggest that Acca could well have been seen as a relative 'newcomer' in the eyes of many of Wilfrid's followers, then there may indeed have been several individuals whose credentials rivalled or indeed surpassed Acca's.[99] We know from later eighth-century records of episcopal succession that bishops' communities sometimes proved hostile even to incoming candidates who enjoyed the open and unambiguous support of their predecessor, and one wonders whether Stephen's evasive wording might have been smoothing over similar problems which his patron had faced during his installation at Hexham.[100] Acca's later career was certainly not free from difficulty, as his eventual expulsion from Hexham in 731 indicates; but we know too little of the circumstances in which he was 'driven from his see' to determine whether or not the manner of his election played any part in that event.[101] In the end, although Stephen's circumspection about Acca's rise to the episcopacy is enough to raise our suspicions, it also prevents us from seeing clearly how Acca had come into his new role. It was clearly important to present

97 See Stephen, *VW*, ch. 63, ed. Colgrave, p. 136, for a comment about the '*praepositi* of the two frequently mentioned monasteries', i.e. of Hexham and Ripon. The last *praepositus* of Ripon, Caelin, receives fuller discussion from Stephen: *VW*, ch. 64, p. 138.

98 Ibid., chs. 56 and 65, pp. 122, 140.

99 Hilliard, 'Acca of Hexham', pp. 447–8.

100 Cubitt, 'Wilfrid's Usurping Bishops', p. 33 and n. 75.

101 Continuations of Bede, s.a. 731, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, *Ecclesiastical History*, p. 572. Alongside the notice about Acca's expulsion is a record that Ceolwulf, king of Northumbria, was 'captured, tonsured, and restored' in the same year; but the precise relationship between those two depositions is equally difficult to determine from the available evidence; see J. Story, 'After Bede: Continuing the *Ecclesiastical History*', in S. Baxter, C. Karkov, J.L. Nelson and D. Pelteret, eds., *Early Medieval Studies in Memory of Patrick Wormald* (Farnham, 2009), pp. 165–84, at 172–3. Hilliard's recent interpretation of these events is too speculative to be fully convincing: 'Acca of Hexham', pp. 455–9.

Acca's inheritance of Wilfrid's episcopal title as obvious in retrospect, but the precise utility of that presentation for the bishop at the beginning of his episcopal career raises several questions that we lack the evidence to answer fully.

We are better placed to understand the significance which the *Vita Wilfridi* possessed for Abbot Tatberht at Ripon, where a deep connection between the abbot and his predecessor was being swiftly and deliberately fostered. Stephen alludes to a series of commemorative acts which Tatberht had instituted at Ripon in honour of Wilfrid, with particular times of each day, each week and each year set aside for collective devotions, private masses and public outpourings of charity.[102] The extent of this commemorative programme differentiates Tatberht from other newly installed abbots, who sometimes staged rituals connected with their predecessors' memory shortly after taking office. These tended to be spectacular but one-off events, such as the translation of relics undertaken at Wearmouth–Jarrow in 716 by its new abbot, Hwætberht, after an election which may well have caused unrest among his monks.[103] At Ripon, however, the commemorative project was an ongoing one. Unlike Acca at Hexham, who increasingly looked beyond the cult of Wilfrid as the importance of the cult of St Oswald at nearby Heavenfield grew, Tatberht's energies remained focused on the continual celebration of his immediate predecessor's memory.[104]

The difference between the two men was that Tatberht had been a blood relative of Wilfrid. He is identified as such in the *Vita Wilfridi*, which twice refers to him as Wilfrid's

[102] See n. 43 above, and discussion there.

[103] See O'Brien, 'Hwætberht', esp. pp. 306–11.

[104] On Acca's promotion of Heavenfield, see A. Thacker, '*Membra disjecta*: The Division of the Body and the Diffusion of the Cult', in C. Stancliffe and E. Cambridge, eds., *Oswald: Northumbrian King to European Saint* (Stamford, 1995), pp. 97–127, at 107–11; and esp. Stancliffe, 'Disputed Episcopacy', pp. 34–5.

propinquus ('relative' or 'kinsman').[105] Unless we are to take literally Stephen's statement that Tatberht acted out of 'love for his father, our holy bishop', the precise nature of their family connection cannot now be known.[106] We know that Tatberht was not the only member of Wilfrid's extended family to have followed him into holy orders, since Bede tells us that Wilfrid's nephew, Beornwine, had numbered among his clergy during the 680s, and indeed that Beornwine had once received from his uncle a substantial portion of land on the Isle of Wight.[107] But not a word about Beornwine was said by Stephen of Ripon, even though an appeal to Wilfrid's earlier readiness to bequeath ecclesiastical property to his relatives might conceivably have made the story of Wilfrid's later wishes for Ripon and for Tatberht sound all the more plausible. There was nevertheless an important difference between someone who had benefited from the open generosity of their relatives, and someone who had stepped forward only after a death as their kinsman's heir.[108] Although it was by no means uncommon in this period for an abbacy to pass between two members of a single kin group, contemporaries were nonetheless aware that there was a tension between convention and expectation.[109] Early medieval saints' Lives sometimes offered cautionary tales about individuals who harboured misplaced or presumptuous hopes that their older relatives in the Church would name them as their successors. The Lives of St Samson of Dol, for instance, told the story of a priest in a Welsh monastery, who was the abbot's nephew and so had come to regard the institution as 'his hereditary monastery which he hoped to possess after his uncle'. His presumption drove him eventually to an attempted murder, and ultimately ensured

[105] Stephen, *VW*, chs. 63 and 65, ed. Colgrave, pp. 135 and 140.

[106] 'pro amore patris sui sancti pontificis nostri': ibid., ch. 65, p. 140.

[107] Bede, *HE*, IV. 16, ed. Colgrave and Mynors, p. 382.

[108] An additional consideration for Stephen must also have been the fact that Wilfrid's lands on the Isle of Wight had been gained after a period of what Bede called 'murderous slaughter' wreaked by a king, Cædwalla of Wessex, who had never been baptised (*HE*, V. 7); but since Stephen elsewhere devoted a whole chapter to the friendship between Cædwalla and Wilfrid, referring unambiguously to the 'innumerable pieces of land and other gifts' which passed between them, it seems unlikely that Stephen's omission can be explained solely in those terms: *VW*, ch. 42, ed. Colgrave, p. 84.

[109] For the wide view, see S. Wood, *The Proprietary Church in the Medieval West* (Oxford, 2006), esp. pp. 127-–39.

that 'by God's just judgement, although he had invidiously and unjustly claimed dominion over [the monastery], never in his whole life did he hold it'.[110]

It would have been possible for critics to malign Tatberht as another such covetous priest, who had presumed that he had a right to inherit that which his recently deceased kinsman had left behind. The Life of Wilfrid which he commissioned from Stephen of Ripon offered an answer to those critics. It openly acclaimed him as Wilfrid's 'worthy heir' (*dignus haeres*), and insisted that the circumstances in which he had attained that position had come about through his predecessor's choice and not by his own presumption.[111] The community in which it was produced was now undeniably a 'family monastery', as so many other eighth-century houses were; but although we have rightly ceased to think of such institutions as an abnormal part of the early medieval Church, the *Vita Wilfridi* gives us no sense that the transfer of abbatial office between family members was always the 'foregone conclusion' which we typically expect.[112] The programme of rapid and varied innovation undertaken by Tatberht in his first days as abbot instead suggests an urgent need to show that he had not simply benefited from an existing family connection, but rather had made serious and heartfelt efforts to enrich the devotional life of the community which had been entrusted to him. The performative quality of some of Tatberht's new ceremonies is particularly striking: he had made a personal promise, Stephen informs us, to mark the anniversary of Wilfrid's death 'by dividing the whole share of the tithe of the herds and flocks among the poor of his people', and to maintain this annual tradition 'for all the days of his life' on top of whatever

[110] *Vita prima S. Samsonis*, I. 14–19, ed. P. Flobert, *La Vie ancienne de saint Samson de Dol* (Paris, 1996), pp. 168–78. See R. Sowerby, 'A Family and its Saint in the *Vita prima Samsonis*', in L. Olson, ed., *St Samson of Dol and the Earliest History of Brittany, Cornwall and Wales* (Woodbridge, 2017), pp. 19–36, at 25–9.

[111] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 66, ed. Colgrave, p. 142.

[112] For the changing historiography of 'family monasteries', see esp. Wormald, 'Bede, *Beowulf*, and the Conversion', pp. 53–8; P. Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature in Western England, 600–800* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 125–34; J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 104–6. The quotation is Wood, *Proprietary Church*, p. 138.

other 'daily alms he was accustomed to give to God and man, for the sake of his soul and the soul of his bishop'.[113] The new rites which he had instituted were therefore not only communal events, but also occasions which demonstrated the abbot's own devotion and generosity, through exceptional acts of charity undertaken in fulfilment of the solemn promises which he had made to honour his predecessor's memory. We do not tend to think that the transfer of office in 'family monasteries' would need to be accompanied by this sort of eagerness to reinforce the abbot's status as the 'worthy heir' of his deceased kinsman. The difficulties faced by the 'idiosyncratic' hardliners, who rejected the intrusion of family norms into monastic governance, are the cases which have stood out most notably to us.[114] But the lengths to which Tatberht went to reinforce the connection with his kinsman suggest that Ripon's transition into a 'family monastery' required justification and persuasion from its new abbot. The text which he commissioned from his priest, Stephen, was a part of this wider project to link himself inseparably with his predecessor. Wherever else it was destined to be read, the monks of Ripon must have constituted the first audience of this Life of 'our holy bishop'; and both Tatberht's commemorative rites and Stephen's Life invited the monks to revisit memories of their departed leader. Stephen repeated back to them the words that they remembered Wilfrid saying on his last day at Ripon, and reminded them that 'from that day onwards, they never saw his face again'.[115] But he also spoke to them about the 'spirit of prophecy' which had moved Wilfrid in the days that had followed, and which had resulted in the installation of 'the worthy heir, the priest Tatberht, according to our holy bishop's command'.[116] Not for nothing, one suspects, did Stephen have to encourage his readers to

[113] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 65, ed. Colgrave, pp. 140–42.
[114] On the 'idiosyncratic' nature of the rejection of kin in this context, see P. Wormald, 'Bede and Benedict Biscop', in Bonner, ed., *Famulus Christi*, pp. 141–69, at 152–4.
[115] Stephen, *VW*, ch. 64, ed. Colgrave, p. 138.
[116] Ibid., chs. 65 and 66, pp. 140, 142.

'put their faith in what [the Life] says'. So much of it relied on those readers accepting that Wilfrid's heir was a better guide to their own memories than they themselves were.

If we still wish to think about Stephen's *Vita Wilfridi* as a useful corrective to the dominant sources for the early Anglo-Saxon Church, we should be clear about the features of the text which give it that utility. It is not because Stephen offers us otherwise unparalleled stories of the monastic treasuries and litigious disposition of a controversial Northumbrian bishop, but rather because he used those stories as building-blocks in an argument that sought to bolster the otherwise dubious claims made by two men who had recently stepped into that bishop's shoes. With what justification Acca and Tatberht considered themselves entitled to their new positions cannot now be known; but the stories which they subsequently told about the prophetic and unverifiable events which had resulted in their personal nomination by a dying saint can only be classed as self-regarding fictions. That conclusion does not devalue the evidential worth of the *Vita Wilfridi*. Rather, it enhances its value, by giving us a rare window into the sorts of strategies by which ambitious ecclesiastics might sometimes seek to gain and secure their positions. Henry Mayr-Harting once remarked that the content of the conversation which Tatberht had supposedly enjoyed with Wilfrid during their unaccompanied horse-ride before Wilfrid's death 'must have been one of the most fascinating chronicles ever to have escaped into thin air'.[117] On the contrary, it may be that we possess just as much of it as ever existed.

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[117] Mayr-Harting, *Coming of Christianity*, p. 130.